LATE S. M. ALI **DHAKA THURSDAY JANUARY 31, 2002** 

### Textbook mess gets bigger by the day

A sign that school education isn't a priority

HE textbook mess seems to go on and on proving that this is one sector that we are totally unable or unwilling to manage properly. Not only has the delivery been delayed to the children but new glitches seem to emerge every day. The government declares on one hand that primary education is its priority and then spawns a textbook situation that resembles a policy seeking permanent illiteracy. Not only are we incapable of providing sufficient and properly printed textbooks and on time, we can't even ensure that the contents are free from political party positions. The latest situation relating to textbooks for Ebtedayee Madrassh is a good example of that.

It's very difficult to call ourselves inheritors of common history when political parties have turned schoolbooks into a playground for battling out their partisan wars. To say that children are being made casualties of this hostility doesn't say enough. They are being denied education and that right belongs to none. Fortunately for the parties, it so happens that we are a nation which doesn't care about education especially primary education. Otherwise this would have led to massive civil protests. But then do we care about schools at all?

The history of fooling around with primary education text books is however one area in which both the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party share a common history. The previous regime saw one of the worst instances of what many would call mishandling of the textbook scene and the concerned minister has certainly earned a permanent name in the annals of Bangladesh primary education for his performance. Although there was an outcry, the repeat of another mega mess shows that the authorities aren't really serious about the problem. This is partly because they themselves aren't affected and also because our capacity to put up with inefficiency borders on the absurd. That we are unable to agree on a few pages of history is not a sign of political disagreement but systemic inability to deliver

And this trend rolls on. Textbooks are a perennial problem and right from free textbooks sold commercially to miswriting, we have it all. If we could face the fact that we don't care about education, we could perhaps move on to the next stage and do something about it. One hopes the powers that be will recognize that we are indeed discussing an issue that needs immediate attention.

### Separation of the twins

A historic feat for us

E are greatly heartened to know that a team, led by paediatric surgeon AFM Masood on Tuesday operated on Siamese twins separating them from each other successfully. One of them has since died due to high acid level. As a matter of fact, the surgery was basically undertaken in consideration of the fact that one of the twins had not been doing well.

So, the purpose behind disjoining the infants was, in the succinct words of Prof Masood, "Saving one is better than losing both." We don't know whether in keeping with the surgeon's confidence, the second one will last; but it certainly was well worth a try and we felicitate the whole team on their having made a headway in this specialised field. The UK, USA and India have had their track-records of debacles beyond the point of disjoining the twins to see if the both live on. It is however usually one of the two that does and that is considered a mark of success.

That the procedure was adopted with courage, diligence and skill for nine long hours, and that too for the first time in Bangladesh, speaks volumes about our coming of age on the medico-surgical front. It has put us on the regional map and, hopefully, it won't be long before we carve a niche in the world with more surgical feats to follow. It is a historic event for us whichever way one looks at it. And from here on we should not look back with the government facilitating the process in all respects with due care and attention.

# Breaking too many eggs to make an omelette



S H IMAM

N THE face of it, this may look confusing, even daunting in terms of establishing an order of priorities from a huge mass of published materials tinged with a somewhat passionate but ineffectual debate over economic sovereignty versus donor diktat. The case in point is, of course, the voluminous reportage of the on-going dialogue between the donor community and the government of Bangladesh (GOB) revolving around our SOS call for stand-by IMF support and the upcoming Paris aid consortium meet. However, reading between the lines of the observations made by both sides at press conferences and sifting through them all, one pleasantly discovers that it is not only possible to separate the husk from the grain but also spot the centre from which the reform process must begin with the prospect of capillary effects.

The sense of loss feels so much

financed through ADP amounted to and Bosnia under the UN auspices Tk 187.4 billion and the same cost 6 billion US dollars, most of outside ADP was to the extent of Tk which though went waste, simply 97.8 billion. In other words, total because no institutions were in SOF losses financed through this place to utilise the money properly. mechanism amounted to Tk 285.2 This is being a guideline for the billion. In terms of US dollars, this purpose of rebuilding Afghanistan loss amounted to a staggering US\$ from the scratch under the UN

been three billion US dollars, as

part of what is projected to be a

US\$ 15 billion dollar undertaking.

Incidentally, the Balkan

reconstruction efforts in Croatia

or so. Evidently, the corrective process has to begin with the state sector. The overall answer to the SOF

crisis is obviously privatisation. But the dilemma here is that none is interested in the losing industrial units while the state's understandable but otherwise indefensible anxiety must be to hand these over to the private sector. In other words, the losing concerns that, to a very large

other options that can be tried out in the shorter run. First, we ask them to repay their loans as an insurance to stay on. If they fail, they perish.

This will put pressure on them to be efficient. Isn't it highly discriminatory to the private sector that it is rapped on the knuckle, left, right and centre, for being repayment shirkers whereas the state sector is a bigger loan defaulter?

The second option will be to bell

# JUST ANOTHER VIEW

The government's short-term policy measures have been to the liking of the donors, but the real test will be in carrying forward the institutional reforms. The political and social costs attached to those cannot be trifled with. However, all one could say at this stage is that the BNP government on the strength of the electoral mandate it has got behind it, can feel emboldened to take some hard decisions that successive governments in the past had promised but could never adopt.

6 billion. The donor agencies say if Bangladesh could cut the annual losses on account of the SOEs, it won't require any foreign assistance" (Syed Kamaluddin in The Financial Express; dated January 29, based on World Bank

hemorrhage of the state-owned

enterprises (SOEs), which will

practically mean 'putting available

resources to good use'. "Between

FY 98 and FY 2001, SOE losses

the heavier from the knowledge that the recent Tokyo meet of international donors for Afghanistan couldn't garner US\$ 6 billion for the reconstruction of that hugely war-battered country. In fact, the initial pledge for Kabul has aegis. So, the buzzwords for Kabul are 'quality (backed by adequate institutions) over quantity' in terms money counted.

Anyway, that is the measure of loss that the heavily losing, borrowing and subsidised stateowned enterprises are inflicting on the national economy. The SOEs' loss in precise terms is Tk 3000 crore per year

If mismanagement and corruption were contained to the level of some middle-income countries, our GDP growth rate would have increased by 2 per cent

extent, have been causing deficit financing, thereby raising the level of domestic indebtedness, which is no better than external indebtedness, will have to be phased out. The white elephants have to go first: there is no iustification to keep Adamjee Jute Mills on artificial resuscitation. The bail-out cost will be a measly amount considering that Tk 80 crore will be saved annually even

Aside from closure and disinvestment, there are three

after the workers will have been

paid out for life (Inam Ahmed).

the cat of trade unionism in the utility corporations and tell them point-blank that they either curb the systems loss or accept take-over by the private sector. Reformed labour laws would need to underpin that. The third step could be snapping the credit line with the NCBs to discourage excessive lending by the SOEs. This will cut the other way by bringing down the banks' default loan figures.

The political and social fall-outs from downsizing the government and the public sector being insisted upon by the donors, would be tremendous, a prospect that calls for alternative employment avenues to be put in place before taking the plunge. The move, needless to say, will be unpopular in the various constituencies of the MPs as it advances. government has been the largest employer so far but it is under donor pressure now to downsize. As it is, unemployment figure is very high at twenty million and every year 2 million more are being added to it. It is therefore critical that FDI and local private sector investments expand in the country for job creation at a rapid pace. Only more of micro-credit-based selfemployment projects coupled with a rapid growth of agro-based industries and agro-businesses can bail us out. As it is, in an otherwise dismal export scenario, our agricultural products have fared extremely well in the world

The government's short-term policy measures have been to the liking of the donors, but the real test will be in carrying forward the institutional reforms. The political and social costs attached to those cannot be trifled with. However, all one could say at this stage is that the BNP government on the strength of the electoral mandate it has got behind it, can feel emboldened to take some hard decisions that successive governments in the past had promised but could never adopt.

SH Imam is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

# A critical responsibility



We can get a jump-start to the

reform process by stopping the

NTERNATIONAL community has pledged an initial sum of four billion dollars for Afghanistan's reconstruction.

Is the first concrete manifestation of world community's promise not to turn its back on AF after the war is over? Although can't be said to be enough, the four billion dollars constitute a good beginning and should help start the gigantic task of the country's reconstruction.

The world's attention is now on Afghanistan, not because of the war but because of the international conference recently held in Tokyo.

Afghanistan has considerable untapped reserves of minerals including gas. Its water resources were never fully developed . Whatever was developed were neglected or damaged during the war. Most of its traditional sources of fresh and dry fruit, stood destroyed.

Afghanistan never had much

and telecom systems fell victim to the ravages of war.

As for education, Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. Talibans contributed to the country's backwardization by closing down girls' schools. The task of reconstruction has to begin with be paid to reviving and soon upgrading the water resources so as to bring life to Afghanistan's agriculture and revive its once booming trade in fresh and dry fruits. It would call for restarting the factories now rusting and planning for new ones according to the country's potential. Gas is

should be to produce professionals and men and women able to run a modern country. Foreign-aided development should help pull the country out of its mediaeval and tribal mould and pave the way for a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. Essentially what Afghanistan needs now is a reasonably well off populaence, an unimpressive figure of two billion dollars was given out for media consumption. The amount indeed is most unimpressive. Afghan government servants have not been drawing pay for months and there are no funds to meet emergencies

The 20-year war totally demolished almost everything that was constructed over the years, including historical structures. All that was history is not likely to be restored but much needs to be done to revive the others, big or small

The problem of resettling at least a third of the population which has been displaced, including the millions that continue to live in neighbouring countries, in squalid conditions, is indeed monumental. They would have to return home some day. Helping Afghanistan out of its difficulties should not be seen merely as a humanitarian but a critical responsibility.

M J Zahedi is an eminent columnist in Pakistan

# LETTER FRÖM KARACH

The problem of resettling at least a third of the population which has been displaced, including the millions that continue to live in neighbouring countries, in squalid conditions, is indeed monumental. They would have to return home some day. Helping Afghanistan out of its difficulties should not be seen merely as a humanitarian but a critical responsibility.

industry. Whatever was there, Russian occupation and Afghans' resistance to it, finished that. Conditions worsened during civil war between mujahideen factions after Soviet pullout. During Taliban regime, entrepreneurs and middle class professionals left the country en masse, bringing whatever industry there were to a standstill. Economic infrastructure, roads, bridges

ment machinery, a big task indeed. The country's interim government head, Mr Hamid Karzai, told donors that the administration would need a minimum of 1-1/2 billion dollars just for establishing and running the government. The next task would be to put the infrastructure in place. electricity and piped water have to be restored as well as the telecom system. Attention must immediately

remained unhurt because everyone needed them. Gas could thus serve as a cheap fuel for industrial development.

Also the country needs major efforts in the direction of human resource development. This essentially means spreading literacy in rural areas, setting up technical and professional colleges as well as institutions of higher learning. Aim

tion having a stake in the country that can keep Afghanistan peaceful and stable

Three months after the Taliban have been removed from power in Afghanistan. Recently a multinational conference was held in Tokyo to discuss and deliberate the world's responsibility towards rebuilding the destroyed economy of Afghanistan. On the first day of the confer-

and formerly the Editor of the Khaleez Times

# **OPINION**

# Land of 6-4-3-2-1 season(s)

**OMAR KHASRU** 

E always read soppy, sudsy, corny, corky, hoary, cheesy poems and other forms of literature that Bangladesh is a country of six distinctive seasons. Much of the rest of the world recognizes four separate seasons. So we thought, with chips on our collective shoulders and great conceit, we were two up on the rest of the world.

Gokhle prominent politician of the British Indian era once remarked." What Bengal thinks today, the whole India thinks tomorrow." That was enough to turn the Bangalee collated head 360 degrees. Sort of like the possessed

spooky girl, played by Linda Blair, in the movie, "The Exorcist". We thought, all superficial and conceited in attitude, we were cerebrally a day ahead of rest of India.

As we bask in the self absorbed glory of our inconsequential superiority, all worthy and beneficial things in life, law and order, safe streets and secure homes, guarantee of natural death, happy and innocent childhood with access to outdoor activities, fresh and clean air and seasonal distinctions are slowly disappearing. They are shrinking and becoming moribund and sinking in quagmire. In our feeble and ineffectual attempt at solution, our natural, innate and inherent propensity is to talk and talk, discuss and deliberate, and

and symposiums. We try to demonstrate our intellectual prowess and fanciful theoretical expertise, following Gokhle's condescending complement, but do precious little meaningful, tangible or mitigating about the real problems.

The six seasons are like all good things that ever existed and do not now exist and may never again emerge. The summer in Dhaka is scorching and repressively hot. Monsoon is wet, soggy, muddy, humid and uncomfortable. Winter is dry and dusty with all sorts of pollen and pollutants floating around, replete with germs, bacteria and increasingly adamant and nagging viruses. The land of fictional and poetic, dreamy and illusory six seasons has now been reduced to these three miserable The salient reason for the shrink-

ing seasons is environmental degradation and little real concern for, and even less significant action against staggering level of air pollution. This may also have something to do with the changing weather pattern, yet to be conclusively and scientifically established global warming. But there is in no way to reduce our responsibility. culpability and complicity. Dhaka has assumed the most unenviable position as the most polluted city in the world, with lead content in the air about 50 times higher than the normal acceptable level. Dhaka has surpassed Mexico City, once

known as 'the gas chamber.' It has become a veritable concrete ghetto, with multistoried concrete structures. ill conceived and ill nlanned. built in areas with no consideration for parking or pristine and quaint nature of the locality or neighbourhood, that seems to radiate heat and discomfort.

Our verbose and expansive intellectuals and society stalwarts have a world of Pollyannaish, often impractical and almost always unenforceable solutions especially in the absence of exigency and good will on the part of the authorities. Some of the solutions by the hoity-toity appear selfserving and devoid of anything that would directly and adversely affect their comfy and cozy living or self interest, even if some of their activities may well be responsible for the sorry state of affairs. They are too busy converting their single unit dwellings into multistoried apartment complex or shopping mall, like a few springing up in Dhanmondi

Winter, one of the three remaining discernable seasons, seems to have largely departed from Dhaka this year. The current winter, with the exception of recent rare light drizzle has been balmy and tropical. The dust and the dirt still linger but the cold weather seems to have mostly dissipated. At this rate the seasons in the city in the not too distant future will be reduced to a single season. And that will be the season from hell!

### TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

### Mayor Hanif, his men at loggerheads

Your report "Mayor Hanif, his men at loggerheads" just goes on to show the vicious nexus between politically backed unions and our elected politicians bleeding the country dry. Two suggestions: One, vote for

Mr Hanif again, if the ruling party backed unions hate him so much at least there will be some check on their respective corruption. Secondly, were this government

willing to do anything, disband all public sector unions and enforce a moratorium on all public sector union activities until they are in a position to function again without indulging in terrorism, looting and extortion? On the other hand, join in the rev-

elry, steal as much as you can and immigrate to Canada. They sell residence permits for five-year fixed investments of C\$ 500,000 MA

Dhaka

Do not set terrorists Most male kids who grew up in

Dhaka during the '80s and even

early '90s have heard of Hazi Selim, the maastan or extortionist. This Baker Bhai of yesterday and lawmaker of today never stopped to amuse the little minds of all great feats of crimes this man could perform. It is truly sad that such a figure can obtain bail from the court of law and continue his spree.

Lax in our judicial system allows criminals to go free. If one looks at this issue from the perspective of the law enforcement officers, such easy escape from the clutches of justice is highly demoralising. Why bother arresting when they always walk out in a few days?

Police arrest criminals, sometimes risking their lives. The criminals spend a week or two in custody, but then are out again on bail. Perhaps, the bail amounts are too meagre to affect them? And why should criminals booked on multiple cases be given the benefit of doubt in the first place and released on bail?

To quote a recent news article published in The Daily Star. "The charges of extortion brought against Pintu were not primarily proved. So, we pray for his bail," the defence lawyers told the court.

"The prosecution side opposed the bail petition, saying that the charges of extortion brought against Pintu were primarily proved. "After hearing both sides, the court granted the bail petition."

What sort of an argument is this? So the argument is, if the charges are not primarily proved, let the alleged convicts go scot-free and perhaps they will commit some more crimes before being caught again. Bangladesh justice system got to be too lenient!

The Prime Minister has pledged to rid the country of terrorists and terrorism. It is time, the relevant law makers and enforcers with the sponsorship of the Prime Minister's office took up this issue seriously. Do not set these criminals free

California, USA

#### Reform madrassah education system

Education is the backbone of a nation. So how strong the backbone is, obviously depends on the quality and standard of our education

I'm talking about our madrassah

tury, this system can only produce some 'huzurs' and 'Imam Shahebs'. And these men seem totally negligent of the fact that the world has changed in the last 1400 years.

They are not only afraid of but also superstitious about the Internet, television, radio, computer and all kinds of commodities that have changed the vision of living. Let alone English language, they even consider Bangla as a non-Islamic language

After passing Kamil (equivalent to masters) a student realises that the output of his 12 years learning is a big zero. He does not know anything about science or arts or commerce. What he has is a complicated and complex ideology of Islam mere like an enigma as he knows that he has to keep a beard, wear the alkhalla (long dress) and possesses a sweet tone to recite the holy Quran. He even cannot give a confident decree on a dis-

I must never deny the contributions and development of moral and ethnic teachings of madrassah. But why is the reluctance and hesitation about sci-tech lessons? The madrassah education system

should be reformed immediately by including technical, arts and business lessons. If anybody wants to take Islamic lessons, he should be allowed to do so, but he must take lessons on other subjects till the intermediate level. We just cannot keep a section of our mass in the dark, bleak world

Ashik

#### Freedom fighter vs traitor

I do agree with Shahriar Kabir that "a freedom fighter can never be a traitor" but I want to rephrase it as "a traitor cannot be a freedom fighter" Shahriar Kabir has fought in our Liberation War, he would understand this phrase well.

Shawkat Hossain F-3, Abashon, Mirpur, Dhaka

### America and its foreign policy

This is in response to the letter "A simple request to the US supporters" (January 9) by SMAH. In his letter Mr. SMAH blamed America and the West for the Bosnian tragedv. I have a different view in this

Certainly, I do not like all of American foreign policy, but their role in Bosnian conflict should be judged in a different way. It is the Europeans and their bigotry who should be blamed for the tragedy. When arms embargo were enforced for the Bosnian Muslims, and the Serbs started killing the innocent Muslims. the then American President Bill Clinton, for several times argued that something needed to be done. At least the Arms embargo should be lifted so that the Bosnian Muslims could protect themselves from the Serbian atrocities.

But the Europeans, particularly British Prime Minister John Major and French Prime Minister Mitterrand were totally indifferent to the situation. They delayed the process to take any steps to save the innocent Bosnians. The creation of the so-called safe heaven was the concept of the Europeans. The Serbs killed thousands of Muslims in Srebrenica, which was also a safe haven. The Europeans acted like mere spectators, as if they had nothing to do except allow the killing to continue.

Finally the American President

came forward, the Serbian morale was broken by their great defeat in Krajina. Richard Hallbrook the American envoy had been carefully observing the Bosnian situation from the very beginning, he convinced the American President, The Serbian dictator Milesovic and his right hand in Bosnia Rodovan Karadzic, should be forced to back down". The rest everybody knows. Certainly, the American policy was very effective in Bosnia

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Haidar

#### Winter in Antarctica Winter in Antarctica is very cold and

very windy. After a few clear days, the wind often rips across the ice at 100 miles per hour. According to Dr. Ted Scambos, a glaciologist at the National Snow and Ice Data Center at the University of Colorado in the USA, these gales are a major feature of the Antarctic climate for about nine months of the year.

Scambos says, temperatures

When there is a clear sky over the Antarctic, the surface radiates away all of its heat into space and chills down to a very low temperature, in fact it is trying to equilibrate with the coldness of space. Dr. Ted

enheit. That creates a layer of extremely cold and dense air that covers the continent. What happens is that cold layer of air starts to slide off the continent like, say, maple syrup sliding off a pancake. It starts to pick up quite a bit of speed as it goes downhill toward the coast because there is this very, very long gradual slope as it hits the coast, and it picks up speed to a tremendous velocity, up to 200 mph in one particular location, but typically 40, 50, 80, a hundred miles per hour around the perimeter of Antarctica. The air gets slightly warmer as it

approaches the coast, but even

then it is still 40 below zero, and the

wind chill is off the scale. The winds

plunge to minus 100 degrees Fahr-

are fierce, but they are also vital to life in the Antarctic ecosystem. They push ice that is floating around the coast out into the open ocean, and that opens up space for algae, fish, birds and sea mammals, and they bring new life to Antarctica's coastal waters in the summer M. A. Obaydullah

Banani, Dhaka